

# The impact of informal social support on individual morale, distress, and satisfaction

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## Abstract

This study assessed the impact of informal social support on job satisfaction, morale, and distress. A 41-item measure of informal team processes as well as a 50-item measure of organisational climate was administered to 38 participants from two organisations. These data were used to test whether informal social support could add to the prediction of the three outcomes. Using hierarchical multiple regression, social support was found to uniquely predict 13% of the variation in morale, after controlling for organisational climate. The proportion of variance accounted in distress and job satisfaction was negligible.

## Introduction

Research into the influence of organisational climate on team functioning and occupational health has gained momentum in the last decade (Harrison & Pietri, 1997; Machin, Fogarty, & Albion, 2001; O'Shea, 1996; Wallace & Hall, 1996; Wilson-Evered & Griffin, 1998). However, informal social support has received much less attention. While some authors have strongly advocated for informal processes of team development (George, 1987; Kinlaw, 1991), few of their suggestions have been empirically researched. This paper reports on a study into the relationship between informal social support and measures of morale, distress, and job satisfaction.

One possible reason why informal social support has been largely ignored in the literature until recently is that it is to define and possibly even harder to assess as a construct. If informal processes could be accurately assessed, they may provide valuable insight into strategies for organisational improvement.

## Importance of Social Support

Social Support has been defined as helpful social interactions on the job from supervisors and co-workers (Way & MacNeil, 2006). A number of studies have found that social support is positively

associated with staff well-being (van Veldhoven, de Jonge, Broersen, Kompier, & Meijman, 2002), reduces the likelihood of burnout, and improves job satisfaction (Felman-Baruch & Schwartz, 2002; Way & MacNeil, 2006). Social support has been known to refer to family support, co-worker support, and supervisor support (Felman-Baruch & Schwartz, 2002) and the questions used to evaluate social support may differ considerably. Other studies may have assessed formal mechanisms such as meetings and supervisor attention. Felman-Baruch and Swartz (2002) found that family, co-worker and supervisor support is associated with job satisfaction. Social support from family members and supervisors was also associated with a decreased endorsement of burnout indicators, and supervisor social support was positively associated with productivity. Florio Donnelly and Zevon (1998) found that co-worker support was the most effective mechanism to prevent stress and burnout with oncology nurses. In a well-designed study by van Veldhoven et al (2002), social support significantly added to the prediction of well-being of individuals but not for strain.

Other authors have asserted the informal social activities in teams lead to better support (Yukelson, 1997) and team performance (Kinlaw, 1991). Informal social support could be exemplified by team social events outside of work hours, team members greeting each other at the beginning and end of the day, and support when a team member is facing a personal hardship.

## Individual Morale and Distress

Research has indicated that organisational demands are better predictors of individual distress, whereas organisational supports are better predictors of morale (Machin et al., 2001; van Veldhoven et al., 2002). Individual morale can be defined as the person's perceptions of the positive aspects of their environment (Hart, Griffin, Wearing, & Cooper, 1996). Conversely, distress can be defined as the result of negative experiences in ones environment (Hart et al., 1996). Hart et al. (1996) asserted that morale and distress are independent of each other

rather than sitting on a continuum. Research has shown that individual morale has a strong negative correlation with intentions to leave and moderate negative relationship with uncertified sick leave (Wilson-Evered & Griffin, 1998). Other research has found that distress predicts absenteeism (Machin et al., 2001)

### **Workplace Satisfaction**

Few concepts would be more central to the study of organisational psychology than *Job Satisfaction* (Judge, Parker, Colbert, Heller, & Ilies, 2001). Job satisfaction is a broad term; consequently it has been criticised as being trivial and negligible (Brief, 1998) as it is difficult to capture. Judge et al. (2001) asserted that job satisfaction had a significant relationship with job performance, and withdrawal behaviour (i.e., absenteeism and turnover).

The effects of workgroup factors on Job Satisfaction have been highlighted. Research has shown that improving team cohesion can result in improved individual job satisfaction (Campion, Papper, & Medsker, 1996; Robinson-Kurpius & Keim, 1994).

### **A Model for Team Development and its Impact on Occupational Health**

Hart et al. (1996) applied the Dynamic Equilibrium Theory as the basis for a model of Organisational Health. This theory forms the basis of the Queensland Public Agency Staff Survey (QPASS) which is a validated instrument that has been authorised by the Queensland Government to be used in public sector organisations in that state (Patrick, Albion, McKeon, Fogarty, & Machin, 2006). It has been used extensively in a number of Queensland government departments including Queensland Health (Wilson-Evered & Griffin, 1998), Queensland Police Service (Hart, Wearing, & Headey, 1995), and Education Queensland (Hart & Wearing, 1995).

According to the model there are 10 domains (scales) to an individual's perception of organisational climate. Eight scales assess perceptions of *supports*: workplace morale, supportive leadership, participative decision-making, role clarity, professional interaction, appraisal and recognition, professional growth, and goal congruence. Two scales assess *demands*: workplace distress and excessive work demands.

Psychological well being can be characterised as individual morale, individual distress and job satisfaction. According to the model, organisational climate directly affects these domains. It is arguable that Q-PASS measures mainly formal workplace process and the measurement of informal social support may add weight to the model.

### **Aims and Hypothesis**

The aim of this study is to determine if a newly constructed measure can improve the existing model developed by Hart et al. (1996). It was predicted that the informal social support would improve the prediction of psychological well-being in the model developed by Hart et al.

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

A total of 38 participants, across two Queensland Public Sector organisations completed the total survey. Of the 38 participants there were 12 respondents from a large public sector department, based in Brisbane (four males, eight females; response rate 75%). The remaining 26 respondents were from a State government educational institution in Toowoomba (nine males, 17 females; response rate 26%).

#### **Measures**

The measures of focus in this paper were part of a larger study called the *Survey of Work Unit Effectiveness*, aimed at identifying the relationship between organisational climate, informal team processes, psychological well-being and occupational health. For the purposes of this paper occupational health was not included.

**Individual Morale and Individual Psychological Distress Scale (Hart, Griffin, Wearing & Cooper, 1996).** This scale was taken from the Q-PASS instrument. The scale consists of 14 items, seven measuring Individual Morale, and seven measuring Psychological Distress. Both subscales are reported to have strong psychometric properties with Cronbach alphas to be .92 and .88 from for Individual Morale and Individual Distress respectively. To make interpretation easier the authors suggest converting scores to a percentage, using the following formula;  $(\text{Total score} - \text{Min Score}) / (\text{Max Score} - \text{Min Score}) * 100$ . This formula has been applied to all measures used in this study.

**Organisational Climate (Hart, Griffin, Wearing & Cooper, 1996).** Organisational Climate was assessed using the 50 items from QPASS. The authors cited Cronbach alphas ranging from .73 to .88. Factor loadings for the individual items are also provided by the authors, with most items having loadings > .7. There are 10 sub-scales. Eight of the subscales assess perceived *work supports*. Two subscales assess perceived *work demands*.

**Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (Weiss, Davis, England, & Lofquist, 1967).** The Minnesota

Satisfaction Questionnaire is a 20-item scale designed to assess an individual's satisfaction with their work-group. This scale has an internal consistency of .87.

**Informal Team Processes Questionnaire (IPTQ).** This questionnaire was also specifically developed for this study (Beccaria, 2002). The scale consists of 41-items that are statements about the informal behaviours, and attitudes of the respondents immediate work unit. There are three hypothetical subscales to the ITPQ: Security, Openness, & Creativity; Social Support; and Identity. Only the 11 Informal Social Support items were used. The internal consistency of Informal Social Support was good at .88.

## Procedure

The 12 participants from the first organisation were collected via paper and pencil questionnaires and gathered by the authors and returned to the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) for data entry. The 26 participants from the second organisation completed the questionnaire on-line. The Psychology Technical Services Department of USQ formatted the questionnaires suitable for on-line administration and collection. Participants were encouraged to collect the data in work hours in both organisations.

## Results

The means of each of the variables and their corresponding correlations appear in Table 1. It can be seen that Informal Social Support was highly correlated with Supports in the Organisational Climate Scale. This would have limited the unique contribution of Informal social support on the individual well-being scales. It was hypothesised that Informal Social Support would improve the prediction of Individual Morale, Distress and Job Satisfaction. Hierarchical Multiple regressions were used to assess the unique contribution of Informal Social support.

In the first analysis, Individual Morale was regressed on Work Supports and Work Demands at the first step. Social Support was entered at the second step. It can be seen in Table 1 that Organisational Climate variables significantly

predicted Individual Morale, supporting the Organisational Health Model. Work Demands had a significant negative relationship with Morale whereas Work Supports did not add to the prediction.

The hypothesis of Informal Social Support adding weight to the model was also partially supported. Informal Social Support significantly added to the prediction of Individual Morale, its unique contribution accounted for 13% of the variance.

In the second analysis, Individual Distress was regressed on Work Supports and Work Demands at the first step. Informal Social Support was entered at the second step. It can be seen in Table 2 that Organisational Climate variables significantly predicted Individual Distress, supporting the Organisational Health Model. Again Work Demands added to the prediction of Distress whereas Work Supports did not add to the prediction. Informal Social Support did not add to the prediction of Individual Distress after accounting for the organisational climate variables.

In the third analysis, Job Satisfaction was regressed on Work Supports and Work Demands at the first step. Social Support was entered at the second step. It can be seen in Table 3 that Organisational Climate variables strongly predicted Job Satisfaction, again providing support to the Organisational Health Model. Both Work Supports and Work Demands significantly added to the prediction of Job Satisfaction. Informal Social Support did not independently add to the prediction of Job Satisfaction.

## Discussion

Findings of this study were mixed. Overall the Organisational Climate variables were able to significantly predict Individual Morale, Distress and Job Satisfaction. Informal Social Support was significantly added to the prediction of Individual Morale; however, its ability to add to the prediction of Individual Distress or Job Satisfaction was virtually non-existent. The hypothesis that Informal Social Support would improve the prediction of the affective outcomes in the model was partially supported.

Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations

	Mean	SD	Morale	Distress	Satisfaction	Demands	Supports
Morale	58.21	18.13	1.00				
Distress	32.51	21.40	-.47**	1.00			
Satisfaction	63.52	13.89	.36*	-.34*	1.00		
Demands	60.89	19.39	-.49**	.46**	-.51**	1.00	
Supports	58.00	17.56	.18	-.29	.60**	-.20	1.00
Informal Social Support	58.68	16.14	.43**	-.28	.52**	-.27	.74**

\* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

Table 2: Hierarchical Multiple Regression Predicting Individual Morale

Variable	<u>B</u>	<u>SEB</u>	$\beta$	t
Step 1				
Work Supports	.08	.16	.08	.53
Work Demands	-.44	.14	-.47	-3.12**
			$R^2 = .24$ , Adj. $R^2 = .20$ , $F(2,35) = 5.58$ , $p < .01$	
Step 2				
Informal Social Support	.59	.21	.55	2.69*
			$R^2 \text{ Change} = .13$ , $F \text{ Change} (1,34) = 7.24$ , $p < .05$	

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

Table 3: Hierarchical Multiple Regression Predicting Individual Distress

Variable	<u>B</u>	<u>SEB</u>	$\beta$	t
Step 1				
Work Supports	-.26	.18	-.21	-1.40
Work Demands	.44	.17	.40	2.68*
			$R^2 = .24$ , Adj. $R^2 = .20$ , $F(2,35) = 5.55$ , $p < .01$	
Step 2				
Informal Social Support	-.02	.28	-.01	-.05
			$R^2 \text{ Change} = .00$ , $F \text{ Change} (1,34) = .00$ , NS	

NS = Not significant; \*  $p < .05$ ;

Table 4: Hierarchical Multiple Regression Predicting Job Satisfaction

Variable	<u>B</u>	<u>SEB</u>	$\beta$	t
Step 1				
Work Supports	.41	.10	.52	4.29***
Work Demands	-.29	.09	-.40	-3.34**
			$R^2 = .51$ , Adj. $R^2 = .49$ , $F(2,35) = 18.46$ , $p < .001$	
Step 2				
Informal Social Support	.06	.15	.08	.42
			$R^2 \text{ Change} = .00$ , $F \text{ Change} (1,34) = .18$ , NS	

\* NS = Not significant; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

There was overall support for the Organisational Health Model (Hart et al., 1996); however, there were some curious findings in light of previous research. Machin et al. (2001) found that organisational demands were better predictors of individual distress, whereas organisational supports were better predictors of morale. This study found that Work Demands were a significant predictor of morale and distress. Work Supports did not add to the model. Work Supports and Work Demands were both strong predictors of Job Satisfaction, consistent with the model.

The finding that Social Support only added to the prediction of Morale is not completely out of keeping with the literature. van Veldhoven et al (2002) found that Social Support was a strong predictor of Individual Well-being but not Strain. It is arguable

that Individual Well-being would have considerable overlap with Individual Morale. Similarly Strain would have overlap with Individual Distress. Work Supports and Work Demands accounted for 51% of the variance of Job Satisfaction, leaving little room for Social Support to add to the prediction of the model.

One key limitation of this study is sample size. Only 38 participants completed this study. The from the small sample size undoubtedly affective the predictive power of Informal Social Supports. If the sample size were larger the Informal Social Support may have predicted Job Satisfaction. Time constraints meant that further organisations could not be sampled. The response rate of the second organisation was also low; this had a bearing on the sample size. The Informal Social Support may also

need further refinement. Construct validity may be difficult to achieve because informal mechanisms of Social Support generally have not been addressed in the literature.

## Conclusion

Examining the formal processes and mechanisms in an organisation has generally been the focus in organisational psychology literature. This study has shown that a focus on the informal and everyday aspects of functioning in the form of Social Support may be valuable. Informal Social Support has added some weight to an existing model and would be worthy of further attention.

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